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PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH ASIA REGION

The present document reports on and analyses major new trends and developments in UNICEF programme cooperation in the South Asia region during 1991.

The UNICEF regional office has responsibility for cooperation in the following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

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I. OVERVIEW

1. The overall situation in each of the countries of the South Asia region is reviewed briefly below.

2. The civil war in Afghanistan has not ended, despite the acceptance of the United Nations peace plan by the major Powers. Difficult trading conditions and the lean 1990 harvest have strained the economic situation of both the Government and the people, made worse by an earthquake in the north-east, floods in the south-west and the continuing hostilities.

3. The February elections in Bangladesh, followed by a change from a presidential to a parliamentary form of Government, should help to end the political and civil disturbances that rocked the country in previous years. The economic growth rate dipped slightly in 1990-1991, after the previous upward trend. Since 80 to 90 per cent of public investment depends heavily on external funding, there are limited options for macro-economic management. Meanwhile, the April cyclone killed around 138,000 people and left some 2 million homeless - an ordeal which the population faced with great resilience.

4. During the past year, Bhutan appears to have maintained its decade-long economic growth, but government revenue resources have fallen short of even current expenditures, and well over half of the development outlays are met by external aid, mostly as grants. Civil disturbances in the south affected the people there, including school-age children.

5. Mid-year, India held its second general elections in two years. The economic growth rate has slid from a peak of over 10 per cent two years ago to around half of that. Responding to a serious fiscal deficit and trade imbalance, the Government devalued the currency and considerably deregulated the economy, mainly to attract external loans and investment.

6. In Maldives, the year was politically uneventful. The economic growth trend continued, although somewhat less than in previous years. Additionally, while the fiscal deficit has grown, the negative trade balance has been offset by service receipts and transfers from abroad.

7. Nepal had its first national elections in May, which marked a largely peaceful transition from a partyless panchayat (administrative district) system, modelled after the traditional councils of village elders, to a multi-party democracy. Economic growth has yet to pick up, although the relatively small industrial sector is performing better than the agricultural sector, which is mostly subsistence.

8. In Pakistan, the economy continues to grow at a rate of about 5 per cent, but the proportion of budget deficit financed by external borrowing has also grown to about 39 per cent. Despite rising exports, the balance of payments remains seriously adverse, and the inflation rate is climbing.

9. In Sri Lanka, the ethnic conflict in the north has continued. The tightening of both fiscal and monetary policies which began two years ago, along with currency devaluation, has been maintained, resulting in a reduced budget deficit and improved balance of trade. The related reforms aim at limiting the public sector, opening up the economy to greater competition and restructuring social support schemes.

10. The foregoing notes on the political and economic situation in the countries of South Asia point to certain broad trends - towards more democratic politics and the assertion of subnational identities on the one hand and, on the other, towards a greater reliance on market mechanisms and away from the bureaucratic management of economic activities so as to release the full potential of the economy.

11. In order to ensure that these trends become mutually supportive, that the aroused expectations of the poor are met and that pervasive disparities of many kinds are reduced, the Government and the community must jointly foster and sustain a movement towards equitable social and human development. Such a movement must place the minimal goals for children at the core of the development challenge of the final decade of this century. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is, therefore, uniquely relevant at this stage of South Asia's social development. It has been ratified by all the countries in the region except India, which is expected to do so shortly. Public opinion is persuaded that those rights correspond to the essential needs of the child and the basic duties of the family, community and society.

II. THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN AND WOMEN

12. To reach the goals of the decade, South Asia has to push harder and travel faster than the other regions. While the region has one quarter of the world's children, it has a much higher share - around two fifths - of all deaths of children under five years of age, as well as of the world's poor, the malnourished and illiterate. Children up to 15 years of age also represent two fifths of South Asia's total population, currently at about 1,150,100. Average population growth rates have been high over the past three decades: 3 per cent in Pakistan; 2.7 per cent in Bangladesh; 2.4 per cent in Nepal; and 2.2 per cent in India. Given the rapid rise in the population of reproductive age that has taken place in recent decades and that will continue for another decade or two, the absolute numbers will increase, even if the growth rate is moderated somewhat during the 1990s. In the meantime, population growth places immense pressure on limited resources to sustain and improve the situation of the people in the area.

13. All eight countries in the region are in the low-income category, with per capita gross national product ranging from $180 in Bangladesh to $430 in Sri Lanka. These and other figures, mentioned below, mask glaring disparities within each country and between geographic areas, economic classes, social groups, urban and rural settlements, males and females. Around 500 million people live in poverty. Infant and under-five mortality rates vary from

26 and 35 per 1,000 live births, respectively, in Sri Lanka, followed by Maldives, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in that order, to 123 and 189 per 1,000 live births, respectively, in Bhutan and Nepal and 167 and 292 per 1,000 live births, respectively, in Afghanistan. Available information on the wasting and stunting of young children presents an equally discouraging profile: 28 and 66 per cent, respectively, in Bangladesh; 19 and 34 per cent in Sri Lanka; 14 and 69 per cent in Nepal; 17 and 42 per cent in Pakistan; and 9 and 51 per cent in India.

14. Among the five larger countries, access to safe drinking water varies from 34 per cent of the rural population in Nepal, 45 per cent in Pakistan, 55 per cent in Sri Lanka and 73 per cent in India to 89 per cent in Bangladesh. Access to rural sanitation facilities, however, is even worse. Adult female literacy rates (15 years old and above) are as low as 14 per cent in Afghanistan, 25 per cent in Bhutan, about 13 per cent in Nepal, 21 per cent in Pakistan, 22 per cent in Bangladesh and 34 per cent in India. A variety of factors, including malnutrition, illiteracy, early marriage, too many births and unceasing work, accounts for some of the highest maternal mortality rates anywhere - estimated at around 460 per 100,000 live births in India, 500 in Pakistan, 600 in Bangladesh, almost 640 in Afghanistan, about 830 in Nepal and about 1,310 in Bhutan, compared with about 330 in Maldives and 80 in Sri Lanka. The magnitude and complexity of the task set for the decade are evident.

III. TOWARDS THE DECADE GOALS

15. In a significant development during 1991, the countries of the region geared their national planning processes to the goals for children and development in the 1990s. Region-wide follow-up of their political commitment to the World Summit Declaration and Plan of Action has taken the shape of 10-year national programmes of action - finding a balance between ambition and feasibility, except in the still-evolving political and security environment of Afghanistan. This broadened and determined approach to a cluster of clearly focused, time-bound basic goals is conceived as integral to each country's emerging, or current, national socio-economic development plan. The initiative is being reinforced by the collective political endorsement of successive summits of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) since Bangalore, 1986.

16. In addressing the practical problems of moving towards the goals, development plans must clearly respond to social needs, which will happen only through a social process with the community at its centre, supported by the country's political and professional institutions. This involves an incremental change in the conventional course of development.

17. In translating this awareness into viable strategies and tangible results, UNICEF in South Asia has played a modest but legitimate role through the year, in three parallel ways:

(a) At the country level, programmes of cooperation between the Government and UNICEF were prepared, or refocused, with the specific aim of catalysing accelerated progress towards the common goals. Examples are the India programme approved by the Executive Board in 1991 and the new programmes for Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Afghanistan coming up in 1992. The ongoing programmes of cooperation in Bangladesh and Maldives are also targeted to the goals of the decade;

(b) Considering the decisive importance of the social strategy adopted by each country for achieving the goals, UNICEF has tried, with significant success, to assist translation into programmatic content of the concepts articulated and the momentum generated by the South Asia consultations on strategies for the 1990s (Agra, 1989) and on indicators for human development (Kathmandu, 1989). This is reflected in each country's increasingly operational emphasis on community organization and action, in concert with intersectoral teams of government functionaries working closely with the community, as a main strategy for effectiveness and sustainability;

(c) Furthermore, in the course of the year, the organizational structure of UNICEF has been reformed to include Bangladesh and Pakistan in the new South Asia region, where the profiles of problems and opportunities for addressing them have much in common.

IV. PROGRAMME TRENDS

18. There are positive signs that some of the major and supportive goals are achievable if present trends continue. For example, in all the countries except Afghanistan, universal child immunization has been fully or nearly achieved; the current emphasis is on sustainable maintenance. Tetanus toxoid immunization of pregnant women is catching up in Sri Lanka and Bhutan, and the elimination of neonatal tetanus by 1995 is a clear possibility, as is the eradication of poliomyelitis during the present decade. With accelerated efforts under way, particularly in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, universal access to safe water is within reach. The dracunculiasis (guinea worm disease) present in some countries of the region will also be eradicated before the end of the decade. The planned reduction of deaths and cases of diarrhoea, measles and pneumonia is feasible in view of the technology and infrastructure available for communication, logistics and service delivery. Control of iodine deficiency disorders is under way across the region through salt iodation and, where possible, the use of iodized oil.

19. The momentum gained in child survival, along with enhanced health care facilities at district and community levels, is being used to advance the aim of safe motherhood, including antenatal care, anaemia control during pregnancy, referral of high-risk cases and care at birth. India currently sets an example of a determined thrust in this direction.

20. Another cluster of major and supportive goals calls for an intensive, population-specific, long-term effort that is part of a more comprehensive

approach to basic human needs. These goals include control of protein energy malnutrition, prophylaxis against iron and vitamin A deficiency, basic sanitary facilities, basic education consistent with quality, adult literacy with equal female participation, responsible planning of births and, especially in the context of the SAARC decade programme for the girl child, a set of urgent affirmative actions calculated to end gender discrimination, sometimes starting even before birth.

21. There are notable examples of credible region-specific initiatives in pursuing the goals. For instance, India has formulated ambitious plans for acceleration of basic education for all, coupled with successful district campaigns spearheaded by a carefully organized voluntary effort for full literacy. UNICEF is playing a significant part in these efforts. In Bangladesh, the dramatic improvement in the outreach of primary health care, and of immunization in particular, has created a new confidence and energy to achieve similar long-neglected and much-awaited aims in sanitation, basic education and community-based women's employment. In Pakistan, the disconcerting realization that social indicators are far behind indices of overall economic growth has resulted in placing the goals for children at the centre of an ambitious social action programme which, in turn, will be the main thrust of the eighth five-year plan.

22. The paramount concern at this stage is what can be done so that these bold nationwide ventures succeed and are sustained through and beyond this decade. Will a greater infusion of external funds as well as domestic budgetary allocations guarantee results? Is the strengthening of the service infrastructure now under way sufficient to improve the indicators of human development? Can the social service sector be transformed through an expanded public sector, or contrarily by opening it up to private commercial enterprise? The search for viable strategies must draw upon the development experience of the region and come to grips with the reality of entrenched poverty in each of the countries.

V. PROGRAMME STRATEGIES

23. An understanding of the link between the goals for children and the causes of poverty suggests that increasing the collective and individual human capacity to cope with poverty is the surest way to curb poverty. Demonstrated results in many parts of South Asia show that it is no longer a romantic dream to enable the poor to become the agents of their own basic development. Nor can the survival, protection and development of the child be assured except through the immediate environment and mediation of the family and community.

24. Social processes have to be consciously promoted by transferring the needed power to organized communities and their institutions. In addition, the strategy has to be as broad as warranted by the essential needs of the community and, as perceived by it, including core concerns such as employment and income, environment and over-population. All the Governments in the region accept the validity of this approach. Most of them have incorporated it into a coherent set of strategic guidelines for action, as listed below:

(a) Enhanced priority for the goals in the national planning process and resource mobilization for larger public investment in the social sector and for the goals in particular;

(b) Use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a tool and a norm in support of the goals;

(c) Promotion of stronger linkages within and between sectoral programmes through a team mode of work among different government departments, focused on the community level;

(d) Decentralized approach to development, with goals disaggregated by district and adopted by communities;

(e) Assisting communities to organize and inform themselves, and to work as a group, jointly with the team of government officials, linked to representative institutions of local government;

(f) Interactive processes of communication, linked to education and training, and focused on the goals;

(g) Capacity and commitment of voluntary agencies and professional organizations to be mobilized in support of the goals;

(h) Monitoring methods and mechanisms, from the community level upwards, to keep track of and publicize progress in terms of programme performance and goal-related indicators.

VI. A RENEWED REGIONAL ROLE

25. The long overdue separation of the post of representative to India from that of the regional director, and the formation of a UNICEF region to cover all the countries of the subcontinent, have helped to reaffirm existing functions and set new objectives for the regional role of UNICEF in South Asia. The rationale for a regional office remains as a two-way bridge between headquarters and country offices for professional services, including evaluation, policy guidance and long-term perspectives on development. In addition, opportunities for programme development are being pursued towards the following ends: mutual support among UNICEF country offices; greater use of intellectual and professional capacity available in the region; fostering intercountry networks of expert panels, professional bodies and voluntary groups centred on the goals of the decade; and, through the Governments, assisting their own processes of regional cooperation for children in development - all of which is also a step, albeit a small one, towards the cause of peace in South Asia.